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Kennedy-Sorensen
A 1000 days

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Kennedy Lucky in His Biographers

John F. Kennedy was unlucky in his assassin, whether one concludes that he was known or (as Leo Sauvage still contends) unknown. But he was lucky in his biographers—if we may call them that when they call themselves something else. Two years after his death, with the help of both Ted Sorensen's book—"Kennedy" (Harper-Row)—and Arthur Schlesinger's book—"A Thousand Days" (Houghton Mifflin)—we are beginning to get a portrait of the man at once sharper and more complex than while he was alive, and some sense of the forces and struggles that swirled around him, and why he made the decisions he did.

I don't know any parallel in the American past, not even Lincoln and Roosevelt who both died in office, where so good a start in taking a measure of the man was made so soon after his tenure of power closed.

How good a book on a President, doesn't depend on how well the author knew him. Surely no one who has written on a President in full scale knew him as closely and worked with him as intimately as Sorensen knew and worked with Kennedy.

But Sorensen has not shaken himself free of that identification with Kennedy and fidelity to him which made him probably the most effective speechwriter any President has had. Still under the spell of Kennedy's tenacious hold on him, Sorensen refuses the tasks of assessment and criticism that usually go with the territory for any historian. This is (he says in effect) not his own book, with his own appraisals, but the kind of book that Kennedy might himself have written had he survived.

This is a crippling restriction and an impossible one to carry out. It is as if Sorensen, having worn for 12 years the garment of identification with Kennedy—and his purposes and means—were no longer able to strip himself of it. The result is an important book, with a remarkable sense of the authentic, with fidelity both to fact and to the man—a book in which we shall be quarrying for years to come. But because it had no animating concept behind it, I am sorry to say that it rarely comes alive either as narrative or as synthesis. The very quality of acting as conductor or reflector of another man's personality—his "shadow," in Jung's term—which gave Sorensen a place in the history of the period, disables him from acting as its historian.

Clearly the Schlesinger book is a different breed of cat. During the entire controversy over his articles in Life, Schlesinger kept insisting that he be judged on the basis of the final book, and he has been vindicated. It has its faults but they are not mortal. By making it part memoir, part history, Schlesinger has skewed the book's proportions and clouded its focus. What happened when he lunched with Kennedy, or what personalities and intrigues he encountered on his mission to Latin-America or to Italy, would be absorbing in his autobiography but one is uneasy about them amidst discussions of the summit at Vienna or the Cuban missile confrontation.

Yet this in minor when set against the book's brilliant achievement. There is a mosaic of colorful detail that nevertheless does not impede the strong narrative flow and the sense one gets of a whole man and of a total chapter in the history of the U.S presidency. There is a glittering portrait gallery. There is a feel (which Schlesinger has always had) for the in-fighting within an administration but also for the interplay of ideas and power that forms the core of the presidential tasks.

One is tempted to draw up much too long a list of the striking aspects of the Schlesinger book. He has an eye for the tasks of forming an administration and recruiting the talent and power elite for its top posts. He has, as I have suggested, a feel for the political theater, in terms of both personal intrigue and the battles of ideas.

If he is inordinately severe with Rusk and the State Department (possibly because of his own encounters with them), his emphasis on the heavy organizational inertia that clogs decision-making in global policy is in the right direction. He has given a remarkably illuminating account of the struggle over policy on Europe and De Gaulle, on Cuba and Latin America, on arms control and deterence strategy. He deals well with the relation of Kennedy to the intellectual elites, with enough of a biting edge in his discussion of the "utopian left" to start a hundred quarrels over the book from Cambridge to Berkely. Most of all, he gives a tender (and not tasteless) account of family life in the White House, and a perceptive one of the influence that Jacqueline Kennedy had on her husband's development.

It is clear enough that Kennedy's successful decisions came in the civil rights area, in the missile crisis, in the test-ban treaty, in the detente with the Russians; and that his failures came in the Bay of Pigs episode, in the "grand design" for a partnership with Europe, and in his relations with Congress and the business community. But beyond these successes and failures there is the moving theme of the quality of growth in Kennedy himself as he dealt with the impossible tasks of the presidency, learned from his false starts and blunders, and developed a sense of complexity and emotional depth.

He was a tragic hero in a double sense—that tragedy happened to him; but also that he had very early a sense of the tragic. Schlesinger points out that while he was a political man, Kennedy was also detached from the immediacies of politics, and stood off a bit, and was the richer personality by that fact. It will be a long time before we can assess even his major decisions. But the tragedy and the grace of him come through even after only two years without him.